A PIED PIPER STORY

Astoria in the Gay 80s and 90s

AUGUST HILDEBRAND
Astoria, Oregon -o- November 1943

The press mentioning Pied the Piper and his rats—and attempted unsucessful emulation of a certain musically inclined California band master—interested me very much —so that my memory was awakened as to certain happenings in the late 80s or early 90s of the last century, right here in Astoria.

Early Astoria was built on wooden piling over the Columbia. The waves of the river rolling under the buildings, driftwood logs bumping against the building foundations.

The heavily wooded, steep hill afforded but scant firm building sites, more expensive to prepare. Piling and lumber was cheap, and wooden homes and wooden streets were in use. In 1883 there were only two brick houses; the old Carruthers residence on Exchange street between 14th and 15th and the I.O.O.F. business, bank, apartment and hall building—a three storried affair much more pretentious than the present one. All the offall and waste was swept direct into the waters of the Columbia through openings in the floors of the buildings, especially in the business part of the town, also horse stable and pigsty manure, with dead fish, Salmon stranded on the beaches, offall waste from 17 salmon canneries, grocery store sweepings (every grocer store kept a stock of animal feed). Cockroaches in the eating places were considered as rat food and for this reason rats were semi-tolorated to help exterminate the roaches. All

these condtions made Astoria, in those days, a paradise—for rats.

The first attempt to rid the town of rats was made by a certain "Pied the Piper" in those early days.

The second attempt for more sanitary conditions was a State law—enacted through the effort of the late James W. Welch, as representative, from Astoria, at Salem—to protect the Sea Gulls as valuable scavengers. This helped considerable.

The third, and most successful effort was made by the late mayor Wm. C. Logan, then a councilman, who was the father of the Astoria Seawall and fill of the mud flats project, under Astoria, as a sanitary problem.

An other incentive for more sanitary condition was a Bubonic scare, when all vessels, arriving from the Orient, were required by harbor laws to place rat guards on their hawsers.

This bubonic scare was the incentive to establish a quarantine station, across the river, where among others, at different times, Dr. Holt, Dr. Jay Tuttle, Capt. Jim Babbidge, Capt. John E. Haggblom, Thad S. Trullinger, Ole Estoos, Joe Johansen and Frank Williams were the main personages for a number of years.

And now, of course, we have the vigilance of city Health Officer Dr. Nellie Smith Vernon, Vern Rierson of the Health unit for Clatsop county and Eugene Chadwick of the State Board of Sanitation; to play the "Pied Pipers" of today.

The stench in Astoria, before these days of improvement, on a bright sunny day, augmented by rotting sawdust on the beaches from three sawmills (Trullingers, Kinneys and McGregors) refuse of the slaughter house of Bergman and Berry at Alderbrook with De Forces Oil factory around Smiths Point—was something to behold in memory. No wonder that the original, fresh Chinook wind was hailed with delight, coming from the Northwest, from the town of Chinook, Washington—across the waters of the Columbia. The meaning of this has changed in later years, and now, Chinook wind is known as a warm, snow melting south and southwest wind.

This combination of rat attracting conditions favored the 10th street location, between Bond and commercial for catching rats in traps—and subsequent sport of releasing the rats, on the street, for dogs to catch and dispose them to the delight of a sportive audience. Rat catching was a sport in those days.

Megler and Wright the genial proprietors of the old leading occident hotel—a hotel that was in line of advancement with any hotel on the coast; a hotel with large plateglass mirrors, crystal gas chandeliers and furniture of the, then modern heavy marble top design; where white gloved, black liveried negro waiters were in attendence; a hotel with a famed liquor bar and the equally famed

clam chowder pot where the nationally celebreties such as Henry Ward Beacher, Harry W. Scott and John L. Sullivan. The prizefighter were made to feel at home.

The upper veranda porch of the hotel was used as a rostrum from which public speakers, politians and 4th of July haranguers were trying to sway public opinion.

Well, Megler and Wright were also the leading Rat Dog fanciers.

They had two full blooded Black and tan Rat Terriers. Black and Tans were the "Fashionable" breed of those days. They are a small, smooth haired, agile breed. The Occident hotel horse stable was located on 10th street where the Firestone Store is now. Every pretentious hotel had a horse drawn coach meet the steamer—and later the railway trains arriving passengers.

A. V. Allens grocery and feed store was located on 10th and Commercial, back, south of the hotel. The Black and Tans were very nimble, often they would toss the rat six to ten feet in the air. In the fall the rat was stunned and then torn to pieces by the dogs, who worked in team tactics; one tearing the rat one way and one the other. When one dog had the proper grip it was simply a matter of a severe shake and the rat was in rat heaven or h—.

Anson Allen, brother of A. V. Allen and Carlton. Allen was the owner of a large black New Foundland dog who would dispose of the rats, caught in the A. V. Allen store. This New Foundland dog seemed to paralize the rats with his size; he had no trouble to grab them dexteriously and with dispatch. Frank Dunbar was at that time head clerk at A. V. Allen. Speaking with him about the rat plague of those days, he told me of one instance: from a stack of boxes Galetta the rats had knawed a hole in the lowest, from behind and eaten the entire contents—entailing a severe monetary loss. Galetta is Italian ships hard bread, round biscuit like; baked in San Francisco; it was the staple fishermen and sailors bread of those days; later displaced by Biscotto —and now with the Scandinavian Rye Crisp.

By the way, in those early days, when Salmon were 25c and 50c, there were more Italian, Greek, Slavonian, Portugiese and Spanish fishermen in Astoria then today. Coming in the spring from the Sacramento river. (Wine and garlic a plenty), and over 2000 Chinese cannery workers. They are, today, displaced by the northern Scandinavian, and with them came that wonderful Viking dish "Lutefisk" yum-yum!

Foard and Stokes— an old renowned, general merchandise firm, also had a rat catching dog, known by every one by the name Jack, a black and white, hairy Scotchman —trained by James J. Stokes, who with Frank Patton, Alsea Fox, Nelson Troyer and a few others were the Astoria Bird Dog fanciers— another great sport—and, by the way Indian George, J. E. Beasly.

Emsly Honghton, Wm. Bock were the keepers of hounds for Panther, Wildcats, Elk and Deer hunting, another great sport in those days.

Well this "Jack the Scotchman" helped to keep the rat sport alive in the neighborhood of 15th and Commercial the site of the Foard and Stokes store. All this, with Sam Harris' Cockfights, at 9th and Bond—and an occasional local, national renowned, prizefight, kept the sporting element in an intensive mood. Also the sailor boarding house fights and street brawls enlivened the sporting scenes.

Well, the first Astoria Pied Piper arrived, and agreed to drive the rats from Astoria. He had a businss head—went to the different merchants and offered, for so much cash, to rid the premises of rats. Many of the firms agreed. Among them was Foard and Stokes with whom I was employed.

I do not remember the amount of compensation agreed upon, but many of the Astoria firms readily agreed, as the monetary damage by rats was rather severe, even if the firms did not mind the sanitary situation as much as we today,, when even the state and nation are stressing on sanitary measures.

The firm of Foard and Stokes was then located in the present Osburn-O'Brien building. The warehouse, a corrugated iron and wood construction affair, was a seperate building in the rear, built on piling, over the waves of the river—and, this is the way Peter did his stunt:—

Like the children, in the Pied Pipers times, all the bosses, employees, customers and children present gathered to witness the performance. Peter the Piper led the procession to the warehouse. It was during daylight. The middle of the day. No sooner had he entered, through the door, a squeeling was heard and presently a bewildered rat scampered on top of a row of feed sacks. Our rat catcher promply grabbed the surprized rat by the neck, and with a defth turn of his fingers flung it, dead on the floor. The noise and squeeling of scampering rats continued, one was getting away to an other corner of the warehouse, while another was covorting on the ceiling rafters, looking down at Peter with curious, beeding, bewildered eyes. We saw three rats and heard many more; the building was not rat proof, they could easily get away. Anyways, the direct result was one dead rat—and a riddance, for about a month or two, of all the rats in that warehouse. While going the rounds in this warehouse, our rat catcher placed, a vaseline like, substance, here and there on the feed sacks, walls and floor. He would not devulge what this was, but at a subsequent informal meeting, of the interested spectators, it was agreed that this substance was some preparation from the sexual organs of an animal, deadly and revengeful enemies of the rat —perhaps the weasel, owl, or such like. We could not smell anything, but perhaps the rats could and—departed.